



ROLE OF GAON PANCHAYATS IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A STUDY OF THE NAGAON DISTRICT OF ASSAM

Harekrishna Borah

Asstt. Professor in Political Science, Thong Nokbe College, Dokmoka, K/A.

KEYWORDS

Elected Representatives (ERs), Gaon panchayat (GP), National Institute of Rural Development & Panchayati Raj (NIRD&PR), Panchayati raj Institutions (PRIs), president, State Institute of Panchayat & Rural Development (SIPRD), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 14th Finance Commission.

INTRODUCTION:

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act accorded constitutional status to the Gaon panchayats with 29 specified subjects under its jurisdiction and provisions for specific funds along with fix tenure and time bound election to these local bodies way back in 1993. Though under the provisions of the 73rd constitutional amendment act, the Assam panchayat Act 1994 was passed, it came into operation only in 2001. The last panchayat election in the state was held in December 2018. Just before the election the Assam Panchayat (Amendment) Act 2018 was passed which mandated that for the post of Gaon Panchayat President, a person should be at least HSLC passed. For SC, ST, OBC and MOBC it was fixed at class VIII passed. Thus a new set of leadership with nominal educational background has assumed office in the panchayats of the state. They are entrusted with the huge task of rural development. Capacity building & training of the representatives of the PRIs has become an utmost priority of the Ministry of Panchayati raj. The Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA) has been insisting on capacity building and training of elected representatives as well as functionaries of the panchayat in order to perform their duties properly. India being a signatory for achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has adopted a fresh approach to capacity building & training of elected representatives of panchayats with renewed emphasis on sustainable development. One of the objectives of the Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA) has been development of governance capabilities of Panchayati Raj Institutions to deliver on the SDGs.

The present study, rationale and methodology:

The paper is a part of ongoing research work "Role of State Institute of Panchayat and Rural Development in Training of Gaon Panchayat Presidents of Assam" which aims to examine to role played by the SIPRD, Assam in providing training to the elected Gaon Panchayat Presidents of Assam. Based on this broad objective the paper attempts to understand the following objectives:

- The first objective of the study is to know whether the GP Presidents are aware of the Sustainable Development Goals.
- The second objective of the study is to observe the role played by the GP Presidents in fulfilling SDGs.

METHODOLOGY:

The paper is based on the data gathered from both the primary and the secondary sources. The secondary data has been collected from different books, journals, government circulars, guidelines, office orders etc. Data regarding trainings were collected from the SIPRD headquarter, Khanapara and Kahikushi and the panchayat offices of the selected panchayats. Primary data were collected from the gaon panchayat presidents randomly selected for the study from those who have attended training.

Respondents of the study are the GP Presidents-who attended the training. Purposive sampling technique was used to pick a total 60 (30 male and 30 female) respondents. In order to get samples from each corner of the district, we have picked up our sample from each block in proportion with the attendance in the training programme.

In order to collect primary data from the Gaon Panchayat Presidents a structured interview schedule was used.

Study area:

Nagaon district is purposively selected for the study as it is the middle district of Assam. Nagaon is a mini Assam in the sense that it is the home of many tribal groups like Tiwa, Bodo, Karbi including tea tribes as well as caste Assamese, Bengali Hindus and Muslims.

According to 2011 census data geographical area of the district is 2287 sq.km. Population of the district is 18.92 lakhs. While 13.09% of the population of the district lives in urban areas 86.91% lives in rural areas. Average literacy rate is 71%. Male literacy rate is 76.51% while female literacy rate is 68.07%. In rural areas literacy rate is 70%. Religion-wise data of 2011 census shows that 43.39% of the population of the district is Hindu while 55.36% are Muslim. SC population of the district is 9.43% while ST population of the district is 4%.

The district has 13 Development Blocks- namely Bajiagaon, Barhampur, Batadraba, Dolongghat, Juria, Kaliabor, Kathiatoli, Khagarijan, Lawkhowa, Pachim Kaliabor, Pakhimoria, Raha and Rupahihat. There are 168 Gaon Panchayats in the district. Out of 168 GPs 135GP Presidents participated in the training i.e. 80%. While the Raha block had 100% participation, the Dolongghat block had the lowest participation level with merely 45%. So while picking up respondents we gave importance to the percentage of participation. Thus while we have picked up 7 out of 16 GPs from Raha block, only 2 respondents were picked up from 11 Gaon Panchayats of the Dolongghat block. As against 58 male President, 77 Women President participated in the training. Out of the 77 female and 58 male presidents-who attended the training 30 female and 30 male Presidents were randomly selected.

The paper is being organized in two segments. The part I contains a brief Constitutional background, guidelines and provisions relating to powers of the Gaon Panchayat as well as the provisions regarding training for the elected representatives of the PRIs, especially the gaon panchayat presidents. The part-II will be findings and conclusion on the basis of primary data collected from the respondents.

PART-I

Constitutional Provisions regarding powers of the Gaon Panchayat:

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was passed with the hope that it will transform our society from feudal to democratic mode by devolving 'power to the people' and alter our democracy from representative to participatory mode. It accorded constitutional status and institutional framework to Panchayats to strengthen grassroots level democracy through elected self-governing local bodies in the rural areas of the country. It also emphasised functional and fiscal decentralisation of powers to achieve good governance through people's participation and thus enabling transparency, responsiveness, equity, efficiency and accountability.

Article 243G of the Constitution provides for: "Powers, authority and responsibilities of Panchayat.- Subject to the provisions of this Constitution, the Legislature of a State may, by Law, endow Panchayats with such powers and authority and may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self government and such law may contain provisions for the devolution of powers and responsibilities upon Panchayats, at the appropriate level, subject to such conditions as may be specified therein, with respect to:

- The preparation of plans for economic development and social justice;
- The implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice as may be entrusted to them including those in relation to the matters listed in the Eleventh Schedule."

The Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution of India contains 29 subjects which includes Agriculture, including agricultural extension, Land improvement, implementation of land reforms, Minor irrigation, water management and watershed development, Animal Husbandry, Fishery, Social forestry, Poverty alleviation programme, Women and Child Development, Maintenance of community assets etc.

The 14th Finance Commission; Awards and guidelines:

The 14th Finance Commission has awarded a substantial grant of Rs.200292.20 crores to be devolved over a period of five years exclusively for the Gram Panchayats for planning and delivering basic services as mandated to them. This is nearly three times more than the award given by the 13th Finance Commission.¹

Table 1

State	FY 2015-16	FY 2016-17	FY 2017-18	FY 2018-19	FY 2019-20	Grand total FY 2015 - 20
Assam	584.80	915.98	1,055.80	1,218.82	1,641.19	5,416.59

(Rs. In Crores, Source: 14th Finance Commission Report, 2015)

Guidelines regarding allocation of Fund:

- 1) The Commission has recommended grants for Gram Panchayats only (without any share for other 2 tiers) as GPs are directly responsible for delivery of basic services.
- 2) The grants are to be distributed to Gram Panchayats as per the approved formula recommended in the latest State Finance Commission (SFC) Report. However, in the absence of SFC formula, grant should be distributed using population of the Panchayat (2011 Census) with a weight of 90% and area of the panchayat with a weight of 10%.
- 3) The grant is to be used to support and strengthen the delivery of basic services including water supply, sanitation including septic management, sewerage and solid waste management, storm water drainage, maintenance of community assets, maintenance of roads, footpaths and street-lighting, burial and cremation grounds and any other basic service within the functions assigned to Gram Panchayats under relevant legislations.
- 4) Grants will be provided in two parts namely- i) Basic Grant and ii) Performance Grant.

The basic grants are to provide basic services to the people like pure drinking water supply, sanitation, sewerage and solid waste management, storm water drainage etc.

Thus, the above constitutional provisions indicate the powers and functions of Gaon Panchayats while the directives of the 14th FC clearly indicate the increasing responsibilities of the GP Presidents. The fund flow to the GPs has also increased in manifold (as expressed in the table-1). The GPs are the real source of authority in so far as planning and implementation of schemes are concerned.

Training for ERs of PRIs: the NCBF:

There was no hard and fast rule regarding training for elected representatives of the PRIs. Ever since the passage of the 73rd amendment act, the need to provide training to the elected representatives was felt urgent. However no concrete step was taken until the formation of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj in 2004. The ministry under the leadership of Mr. Mani Shankar Iyer conducted seven round table conferences with the ministers of panchayati raj of the states in different key issues. The last round table conference which was held in Jaipur decided to frame policy regarding Capacity Building & Training of elected representatives as well as functionaries of panchayat. Later in 2006 the first National Capacity Building Result Framework (NCBF) came into existence- which outlines among others a comprehensive approach with overall objectives to enable elected Panchayat representatives to upgrade their knowledge and skills to better perform their responsibilities. The NCBF mentioned about periodic and time-bound training for elected representatives and called for a close collaboration between MoPR, NIRD as well as the State Institutes of Rural Development at state level. The NCBF-2006 was modified as NCBF-2014 which specifically mentioned that the elected PRI representatives should get the first spell of training within the first six months of their election. It also specified the course content of such trainings and authorized the NIRD to develop such study material in both English as well as Hindi language so that the SIRDs can translate it into their regional languages and incorporate state specific items in it.

The Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA):

The MoPR launched Rajiv Gandhi Panchayat Sashaktikaran Abhiyan in 2013 to enhance capacities and effectiveness of panchayats. In 2018, the Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA), a revamped version of the Rajiv Gandhi Panchayat

Sashaktikaran Abhiyan was launched for implementation from 01.04.2018 to 31.03.2022 with total budget outlay of Rs.7255.50 crore. One of the objectives of the RGSA has been development of governance capabilities of Panchayati Raj Institutions to deliver on the SDGs. One of the focus areas of RGSA is to ensure basic orientation training for the elected representatives of panchayats within six months of their election.

Training of ERs of PRIs: the role of SIPRD, Assam:

The SIPRD, Assam being the apex organization in the field of capacity building & training, has been mandated with the responsibility to provide much needed training to the newly elected representatives of the PRIs. The institute has conducted 5days orientation training programs for the GP presidents in its headquarter- Khanapara and Kahikuchi. It is to be mentioned here that the orientation training programme for the newly elected GP Presidents of Nagaon district was held in the Kahikuchi campus of the institute from 26-06-2019 to 28-06-2019. The training schedule contained a session on sustainable development goals. The participants were provided with a good piece of handbook which contained a chapter on sustainable development goals.

PART-II

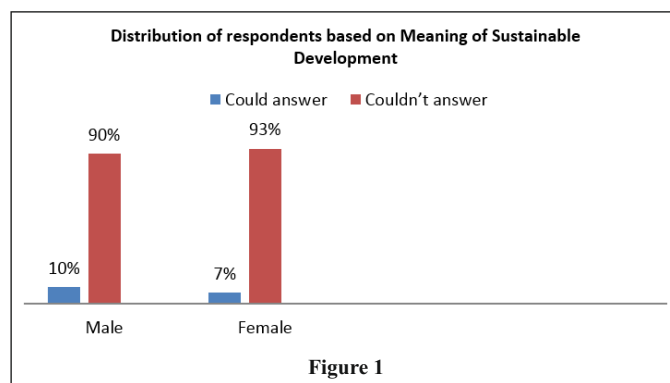
The schedule developed to collect data from the respondents contained 3 specific questions on sustainable development. Questions were put in Assamese language so that the respondents could understand easily. The questions were:

- 1) What does sustainable development means?
- 2) Do your Gaon Panchayat Development Plan includes plan for-
Water conservation / plantation / waste management / clean energy / poverty reduction plan / supply of pure drinking water / construction of public toilet.
- 3) Do your panchayat have undertaken any work / planned any scheme in collaboration with SHGs / NGOs / educational institutions / farmers / businessmen / religious institutions etc?

In so far as the first question is concerned, we have found that only 2 female GP Presidents and 3 male GP presidents answered positively. (Table-2, Figure-1)

Table 2

Distribution of respondents based on their answer regarding meaning of Sustainable Development		
Total respondent (60)	What does sustainable development mean?	
Male- (30)	Could answer-03	Couldn't answer -27
Female-(30)	Could answer -02	Couldn't answer - 28

**Figure 1**

The above figure exhibits that only 7% female and 10% male GP Presidents have heard about sustainable development goals. Thus roughly more than 90% of our local rural leaders who have not only authority but also fund and functionaries to plan and implement development projects in rural areas are unaware about the SDGs.

In so far as the answer to the second question is concerned we have found responses which are in table-3.

Table 3

Total Respondent-60	Water conservation	Plantation	Waste management	Clean energy	Poverty reduction plan	Supply of pure drinking water	Construction of Public toilet
M-30,F-30	M-0, F-0	M-0, F-0	M-0, F-0	M-24, F-28	M-0, F-0	M-0, F-0	M-09, F-12

The above table shows that the basic issues which are closely connected with SDGs are not taken up by the respondents. 24 male and 28 female respondents have taken schemes related with clean energy. But when talking about the

scheme it was found that they have taken up scheme for installation of solar panel Street light in their locality. Only 9 male GP Presidents and 12 female GP Presidents have included schemes for construction of public toilets. When asked

about the construction sites it came to know that demands for such public toilets usually comes from religious institutions like namghor, mandir, mosque etc. Otherwise no scheme for water conservation, plantation, waste management, poverty reduction as well as supply of pure drinking water has been taken by the gaon panchayats. It is to be mentioned here that the 14th FC guidelines specifically mentioned that basic grants to the panchayat is to provide basic services like supply of pure drinking water. The central government also sets a target of providing clean drinking water to all by 2024. However no scheme for supply of pure drinking water was taken by the panchayats even though the Mission Antyodaya gap report shows that drinking water facility in the villages of the entire Nagaon district is in miserable condition.

On the other hand from 1st July to 15th Sept. 2019, all the states and UTs of India worked on Jal Shakti Abhiyan inspired by the impetus given by the honorable PM on Jal Sanchay. In Assam special gaon sabha on jal shakti was called by all the Gaon panchayats of the state. Yet we have found in the research work that no scheme was taken in the field of water conservation.

In so far as the third question is concerned it is found that no panchayat has either undertaken or planned any scheme in collaboration with SHGs / NGOs / educational institutions / farmers / business groups / religious institutions etc. In fact it seems that they are totally unaware about the need of synergy between panchayat and other community based organizations like SHGs, NGOs etc.

CONCLUSION:

It is clear from above analysis that more than 90% GP presidents of the Nagaon district are still unaware about sustainable development. We know that the last one of the 17 SDGs is the most important among all- which says- partnership to achieve the goal. This partnership is conspicuously absent in gaon panchayat level. There is an urgent need to re-orient the GP Presidents of the state in so far as the SDGs are concerned. The SIPRD Assam must take note of the situation which simply signifies the failure of their training initiative particularly in the case of SDGs. The chapter on SDGs in the handbook it provided to the ERs of PRIs is complex in nature which needs simplification. Merely mentioning the goals in text book style is not going to work. As the GP Presidents are authorized to plan for the rural folk and have funds well as functionaries to implement such plans, they must be provided with adequate training and hand holding support. They are the real agents of change in our rural areas.

REFERENCES:

- I. Subhas C Kashyap, Citizens and the Constitution, (New Delhi, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 2002).
- II. Panchayati Raj Bebothar Nirbasita Protinidhi Aru Bixobibia Hokolar Prasikshanar Hatputhi (Training manual for elected representatives and officials of panchayati raj system), SIPRD Assam, Guwahati, 2019.
- III. Annual Report, 2017-18, SIPRD, Assam, Department of Panchayat & Rural Development, Government of Assam, Khanapara.
- IV. "The Assam Panchayat Act 1994 with Rules 2008," Panchayat & rural Development, Government of Assam, (website) accessed July 23, 2018, <https://pnrd.assam.gov.in/documents-detail/the-assam-panchayat-act-1994-with-rules-2008>.
- V. National Capacity Building Framework, Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, (website)/NCBF%202006.pdf, www.panchayat.gov.in,
- VI. Sustainable development goals and gram panchayats', government of India and the UN, 2018.
- VII. Report of the 13th finance Commission, <https://fincomindia.nic.in/writereaddata/html>.
- VIII. Report of the 14th finance Commission, <https://fincomindia.nic.in/writereaddata/html>.